

Empowering communities: a way towards stronger health systems

Episode 7 of the webinar series
'Health Management in action: Fostering health systems' resilience'

Speaker

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The seventh episode of the webinar series *'Health Management in action: fostering health systems' resilience'* investigated community engagement in health governance and health systems and the need to shift to community-based, health-promoting health systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unequal impact on people, affecting more intensively vulnerable populations such as children, migrants, homeless people, and elderly care homes residents. This impact is likely to have long-term consequences. On the one hand, determinants of health and inequalities interfered with the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic widened inequalities, increased poverty, and exacerbated educational gaps.

Lessons learnt from the pandemic should be translated into strategies. It is crucial to systematically reach out to and include views from communities and groups of people in society. For this purpose, **we should enhance capacity-building for inclusive health governance, create a systematic and regular mechanism for social participation, and foster social movements**. Trust in society can only be built bottom up and in co-creation. Critically important is that preparedness plans assess and mitigate the 'collateral damage' of response measures across sectors. In this regard, it is helpful to engage with Behavioural and Cultural Insights (BCI) units and multi-disciplinary sciences, to ensure mental health support, social protection and support measures, empower communities, boost health promotion and disease prevention, and build resilience and wellbeing.

We should nudge for a shift toward community-based, health-promoting health services. In this process, the role of health managers is essential. Health services should implement specific health promotion and prevention interventions, such as screenings and vaccinations, but also preventative home visits and outreach initiatives to vulnerable communities. Finally, health services should engage with health promotion and prevention in other sectors to address for example social needs, addictions, substance misuse, sexual violence, abuse, and mental health.

It is important to generalise resources available at the community level: local authorities can support bottom-up, community initiatives. At the local level, governance can remove legal and structural barriers, provide funding, and facilitate the sharing of experiences.

Inclusive health governance can enhance trust in health policy by enabling people to express their voices and address power imbalances in our society. Inclusive health governance encompasses different levels of participation, from highly participatory to more institutional, and is guided by three principles: inclusiveness, intensity, and influence. The participatory work can be conducted in person, through consultative or deliberative methods, or through formalised mechanisms with fixed seats.

Finally, if designed and applied to meet the needs of different groups facing vulnerability, technology can empower communities and improve health. This requires securing safe digital environments and infrastructure, improving access of people with or facing vulnerability, engaging groups we want to reach more in the development and testing of these technologies, and improving digital health literacy as well as skills of health professionals and the wider community.

Take-home messages

- The involvement of communities in health governance and in health systems is crucial. Local authorities should facilitate effective community engagement and inclusive health governance.
- In crisis response, mechanisms to consider Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) are needed to avoid long-term consequences. This requires engaging with people most impacted in systematic ways.
- We need to shift to community-based, health-promoting health systems and focus on prevention, with the support of health management.
- It is crucial to explore the use of technologies while improving digital health literacy and closing digital exclusion and gaps.



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